

AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Rev. Kit Ketcham, October 7, 2007

It had been a tough few months in my little Portland congregation, several years ago. Because of serious financial concerns, the Board of Trustees had decided to form an ad hoc committee to look for less expensive space to rent, to hold worship, to carry on office activities, and to hold meetings, but it hadn't been easy to find another space there in Southeast Portland.

I hoped we could find a place where we could hold morning services; others in the congregation lobbied to continue meeting on Sunday afternoons, despite the dampening effect on our attendance and membership growth.

It just complicated matters when our host church, a United Methodist congregation with lots of space, an elderly membership, and a tight budget, offered to cut our rent to a more manageable level, so as not to lose us and our contribution to their financial security, and the question then became "do we move to another space or stay put?"

The congregation was deeply divided over the issue; a Unity congregation nearby seemed to be the favored locale by many, even though it had serious limitations. I was concerned about the similarity in name, the difficulty of sharing classroom space on Sundays, and the lack of handicap access to the offices.

I and others wanted to stay put. I felt we would lose the valuable momentum we'd achieved if we moved, for despite the obstacles, we had almost doubled our size in the three years I had served them.

After a congregational vote on the issue revealed that two thirds of the congregation agreed with me and wanted to stay in the Methodist building, I was relieved and expressed my relief audibly after the vote. Not smart!

My impulsive response enraged a number of people who had voted to move to the Unity building and not long after the vote, a small group of dissidents formed, meeting in living rooms, talking via email, expressing their displeasure and devising a plan of action.

Soon a letter was sent to the Board of Trustees, with a long list of all the things they thought I had done wrong over the past three years, with signatures of about twenty members, many of them people I had felt close to, had helped with major life crises, and whom I had considered friendly and supportive of my ministry. And the convener of the group, to my dismay, was a woman I had come to trust and depend on, in the congregation.

I was devastated, needless to say. I knew I had made mistakes but they were mistakes made out of ignorance and inexperience, not malice. Yet here were men and women I had devoted myself to, women and men who had never said anything negative to me before, angrily accusing me, as a group, of being an incompetent and insensitive minister.

The Board and I spent many hours considering our options. I sought out the help of our District Good Offices minister, talked to our District Executive, and the UUA's director of Extension ministry, who had matched me with the congregation.

Eventually, I decided to tender my resignation, effective at the end of the coming church year, after the dissident group sent a message to the UUA asking how they could get rid of me

I felt horrible. I knew I had not done anything illegal, immoral, or unethical, only stupid, and my conscience was clear. In my inexperience and lack of wisdom I had not been able to meet every need in the ways this small group thought I should. And my vision of ministry clashed with theirs.

I wanted them to grow, to find space where we could hold morning services, to reach out into the community, to have a greater social justice impact, and to become a Welcoming congregation where the ideals of Unitarian Universalism were clearly lived out. They thought I was pushy and overbearing, not intellectual enough, not concerned enough about certain issues, bringing too many changes, too quickly, to the congregation.

Now, I'll admit, I have many faults. I am a bulldozer at times about issues I care about. I tend to forget that I'm always "on" when I'm with congregants. And I am known to get a bit defensive when criticized. And when the District Contact team came to help us sort out our troubles, they made sure I understood how I had contributed to the mess. And I couldn't help but agree. They were right.

The Contact Team helped the congregation see that much of our conflict was attributable to growing pains and financial concerns, that messages to me about what they wanted from a minister were confusing and contradictory, that it was unfair of a small group to get together privately, with a private email list of dissidents, and gripe and plot to get rid of the minister, that in a true community, conflict needed to be open, kind, and democratically conducted.

Their report didn't make everyone happy, of course, and several folks continued to agitate about their concerns, some left the church, and others quit attending regularly. The rest of the year looked as though it would be pretty bleak, and it was only November.

I was angry and sad and it was hard to find enough gratitude in my heart to write a decent Thanksgiving sermon, but the holiday was coming up and people needed to hear that we were going to be okay, that we were making progress, that I was going to be okay. Of course, I wasn't sure I would be okay. I had visions of having to leave ministry, that I would not find another congregation to serve, that the conflict had ruined my chances of fulfilling my call to ministry.

On that Thanksgiving Sunday, I offered a sermon in which I acknowledged and apologized for the mistakes I'd made, told the congregation what I would do to make amends for those mistakes, and made copies of the sermon to send to every absent member of the congregation.

We also did a ritual at the end of the service, with polished stones to represent our hard times and the refining process of surviving hardship and candles to represent our hope for the future, to acknowledge the tough time we'd come through, to agree to do the healing work necessary, and to move on.

The day before Thanksgiving, I came home to find a message on my answering machine. It was from the woman who had led the group of dissidents. When I heard her voice, I cringed, afraid that a new assault was in the works, but instead I heard, "Kit, this is Roxy. I want to apologize. I've treated you very badly. Can we get together and talk? I want to make things right."

It is hard for me to describe adequately the emotions and thoughts that arose in me because of the phone call. Even today, repeating her words gives me a lump in my throat and floods me with gratitude for her act of kindness and reconciliation.

When I think back to those difficult days, that long, agonizing season of pain, I remember her voice on the phone and experience again that immense gratitude. The sage Meister Eckhardt once wrote: "if the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

And all the rest of my life, I will say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." For we did get together, we did talk over a cup of coffee, and we each apologized and made amends for the hurts we had given each other. I had hurt her and didn't know it. She had, in turn, hurt me, out of her sense of injury.

This sermon was originally prepared to be delivered in August, and in the first couple of Sundays of that month, two esteemed preachers approached the idea of “home” from two different angles. Malcolm Ferrier discussed how we develop and establish a sense of belonging to the land, as we evolve a feeling of community. Chris Highland addressed the idea that “home” is not so much a place to be located as it is a place from which we reach out to others in our human community.

I hope to bring to us, today, a sense of what our responsibilities are to each other, as a community, as a place, a home, where we hope to belong, a home where we hope to grow in our own souls, and from which we hope to reach out to others and invite them into our community of love and justice.

On that original August Sunday, we were rained out and took refuge at Tom and Terri’s house nearby. Because of that, we only shared a few elements of the service, one of which was a fable you may have heard before. Let me reprise it briefly.

A monastery in the ancient woods had fallen into decline and the abbot was very discouraged. In meeting with his friend the local rabbi one day, he wept for his beloved community and shared his despair at the loss of faith in his fellow monks. The rabbi listened for awhile and then said to him, “You should know that we have long known in the Jewish community that the Messiah is one of you.”

The abbot was stunned and when he went back to the monastery he began to look at his fellow monks through a different lens. If the Messiah was one of them, he should be treated with reverence and respect, and so he began to treat his fellows with that reverence and respect. Gradually, the rabbi's words began to be known among the residents of the monastery and attitudes shifted. Soon the whole monastery was alive with kindness, respect, reverence, and love, and novitiates came to join the community that formed within those walls. The monastery began to thrive once again and became a place of wisdom and grace and loving-kindness.

And for all of them living there together in those ancient times, the truth that their life together was based upon was the radical idea that the Messiah was one of them.

In this story, the value of reverence and gratitude toward our fellow human beings is illustrated in a remarkable way. "One of you, one of us, is the Messiah." What a thing to hear, that one of you, one of us, is a person who will change the world, will bring the world a time of peace and healing.

Now, we Unitarian Universalists are a little skeptical about Messiahs. We're not crazy about gurus or prophets or authority figures. But we do like to hear about new ideas, new technologies that will help our world deal with some of its most pressing problems, and we admire the person who has the courage to explore these things, to examine their potential as world-saving ideas and processes, and to bring them to our attention.

But Messiahs? Hmm, even though many of us really like Al Gore and Nelson Mandela and Michael Moore and a few other well-known folks, Messiah is not what we'd call any of them, at least not yet. But "messiah" can have a broader meaning, beyond the Jewish and Christian, more traditional concepts. Let me offer a couple of variations on the theme.

A messianic figure, as portrayed in some internet sources, is a person who is viewed as having a number of the characteristics of the Messiah in the eyes of a particular group. These usually include that the person is charismatic, influential, develops a power base, is appealing to a large group that views itself as oppressed in some way, and appears to offer a way to overthrow that oppression.

Examples of messianic figures include Joan of Arc, said to have visions to deliver France from English domination near the end of the Hundred Years' War, and, on the other side of the coin, Adolf Hitler, who claimed he would deliver post-World War One Germany from economic oppression caused by reparations and protect Germany from Communists.

I like to think of "messiah" in a different way. Isn't that what we Unitarian Universalists do all the time anyhow? redefine words in a metaphorical way, so as to make better use of them? I do, anyhow. As a Baptist preacher's kid turned UU, I have learned to be religiously bilingual, able to translate traditional Christian language into something that makes better sense to me without losing the essential meaning.

So to me, “messiah” has a metaphorical meaning, and when the rabbi says, “the Messiah is one of you”, I think immediately, ‘what does a messiah do? a messiah offers a path to better living, to peace of mind, to healing of the heart, to deep friendship in community, to courage and commitment, to greater love.’ And then it hits me that any one of us, all of us, have this power---to do something meaningful to make the world a better place, a place of love and justice.

And because we all know that one small act of kindness is never wasted, because we know that many small acts of kindness create an atmosphere of appreciation and consideration, we are not surprised when the monastery, operating under the belief that one of those lonely monks is the messiah, we are not surprised when the residents of the monastery begin to change their attitudes toward one another, and the monastery begins to blossom and offer its peaceful atmosphere to those around it.

And the lives of those in that tiny community are changed, because of the possibility that one of them is a person who will bring peace and healing to the world.

A common greeting in yogic and Hindu practice is the word “Namaste”, said with a small bow to the one greeted. It means “the Divine spirit in me honors the Divine spirit in you” and is offered in respect and gratitude for the gifts another person brings to life.

The Beloved Community, which we strive to create here at UUCWI, depends on a spirit of Namaste, a spirit of appreciation and gratitude for the gifts each of us brings to the community.

Our sense of belonging in the beautiful new home we are building is enhanced by the sense of appreciation and gratitude we offer each other. Our own sense of safety in this place is deepened by the expressions of appreciation and gratitude we receive from each other.

Belonging to a community means that we trust each other and that we expect to be trusted. It means that we are kind and that we expect kindness. It means that when we disagree, we use trust and kindness to resolve it. When we are recipients of kindness, we say thank you. When we feel a need to give valuable critique, we are kind and offer appreciation and gratitude as well.

As human beings, we need to belong. At the same time, we are self-protective. We want things to be the way we want things, whether that's a fondness for classical music or jazz in our worship services, a distaste for certain religious terms or a love of familiar religious language, an uneasiness with the idea of prayer or comfort with that ancient practice.

Sometimes we forget that we belong to a very diverse faith community and that what we like or dislike may feel just the opposite to a fellow worshipper. It's useful, when we feel that discomfort, to reframe the moment into one in which we are willing to sacrifice our personal desires temporarily so that another can be served in that moment, trusting that others will do the same for us at another time and forgiving the occasional unintended slights we give and receive in human life.

Gratitude for the gifts each of us brings to our community, gratitude to the universe for its many blessings and challenges, gratitude to ourselves, even, for our openness to growth-----gratitude is the fuel that our life together as a community thrives on. Appreciation for the efforts of every person in a community strengthens that community and helps to heal the wounds inflicted by an indifferent world.

The world's greatest philosophers and humblest citizens have called an attitude of gratitude one of life's most important positive attributes. Melody Beattie writes: "gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow."

Cicero wrote: "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." Rabbi Harold Kushner states: "Can you see the holiness in those things you take for granted---a paved road or a washing machine? If you concentrate on finding what is good in every situation, you will discover that your life will suddenly be filled with gratitude, a feeling that nurtures the soul." And William Blake says, "Gratitude is heaven itself."

In this year together as a congregation, we will face many challenges: the exciting process of building our own home in the woods, the hours spent hammering and painting and polishing together, the effort to reach out into the larger community with our resources, inviting others to join us in our work of love and justice, growing in spirit, in numbers, in strength of character.

All our challenges as a faith community, just as in life generally, give us opportunities to both complain or compliment, to gripe or to take action, to criticize or to appreciate. It's been fairly well documented, scientifically, that an attitude of gratitude, a message of appreciation, a movement to be generous and helpful, all are conducive to greater joy, that when we focus on the negatives, the things that aren't quite right by our standards, we deprive ourselves of the pleasure and satisfaction that come from extending gratitude and appreciation to others for their efforts.

My own commitment during this year to come, as we get tired and sore and perhaps occasionally scared and nervous over the many challenges ahead, my commitment is to double my efforts to appreciate you all, to treasure my time with you, to tell you often what I like and love about what you all do for this faith community. Because I believe that appreciation and gratitude are the glue that holds us together, that when we gripe and criticize unnecessarily, we weaken the bonds between us.

Will you join me in making this culture of appreciation a reality here in this community, our sacred home? Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

HYMN: #128 "For all that is our life"

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that gratitude is the partner of joy, that appreciation is the antidote to criticism, and that a joyful community is a community of gratitude and appreciation. May we strive to make this sacred place, this home of ours, a place of joy and gratefulness.

Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.